

Voicing the Devoiced: A Study of Tamsula Ao's Short Stories

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"Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard- stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions. Because stories live in every heart, some get told, like the ones on these pages..." Tamsula Ao

North East has been a site of vivacious literature and vibrant culture. Despite the inner conflicts and political confusions, the region has produced sensitive writers who have excelled in presenting the contemporary issues through various genres of literature and different forms of arts. Tamsula Ao is one of the prominent and leading women writers of Northeast India, and her major focus is on voicing the devoiced Naga people. Her two short stories collection *Laburnum for my head stories* and *These hills called home stories from a war zone*, estimate uneven, unanswered, unfinished, frustrated, yet quite ambitious and astonishing painful journey of Naga people for identity and independence for more than half a century of violence and bloodshed. As Tamsula Ao says in preface, "Many stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Naga from early fifties of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State. But while the actual struggle remains a backdrop, the thrust of the narratives is 'revolutionized' the Naga psyche. It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Naga within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity. It was almost like a birth by fire. While some remained untouched by the flames, many others got transformed into beings almost unrecognizable, even to themselves. Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome."

The apparent reading of Tamsula Ao's stories depicts refusing to political stand, but when the stories are read in between lines echoes the difficulty of taking such a stand in chaos situation of violence and dilemma, rather her quest might be in looking for powerful alternative that is alternative narrative can be called as counter narrative.

Tamsula Ao's stories reverberates past memory, present and looking forward for future, it can be observed in her preface of *These hills called home stories from a war zone*, "But what do you do when it comes to someone else's memory and when that memory is of pain and pain alone? To you brush it aside and say, it does not concern me? And if you can do that, are you the same person that you were, before you learnt of the pain of a fellow human being? I think not, and that is why, in these stories, I have endeavored to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged." Further she tries to encapsulate the onslaught of globalization and urbanization on the peaceful idyllic lives and traditional way of Naga people.

Nagaland is one of the seven sisters: Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland that constitutes North East. The region has been a site of internal dispute and tension on one hand and conflicts with central

government on the other hand for the second class citizen treatment and for ignoring their border problems and tribal clashes. The region also has feeling of being cut off from the mainland and mainstream people of the nation. Despite these burning issues North East has also been a fertile ground for vibrant literary production as is evident in case of Tamsula Ao. However Naga are never homogeneous tribe and no homogeneous administration system, which paves the way to system of anarchy. Tribes have their distinct cultural custom and tradition, dialect and their own system of governance. The Naga people are constantly facing various problems like social exploitation, political operation, feeling of deprivation, but the core conflict is identity crisis that emerged against the back drop that they were neither completely a part of Nagaland nor left on their own. When Britishers departed from India, Nagas demanded separate nation on their territories on the lines of Pakistan. There was constant strives and turmoil not only between the center but also between the states and their own ethnic tribal groups. The ordinary people have always been the scapegoats and are crushed under the center and state which makes them search for their identity. North eastern literature is multilayered and multidimensional focusing on the issues of insurgency and identity, presence of militia along with social and ethnic contexts.

This paper is an attempt to foreground the crises of the individual against the backdrop of Naga Separatist Movement and Indian Government as espoused in Tamsula Ao's *These Hills called home: Stories from a War Zone and Laburnum for My Head Stories*.

Tamsula Ao's Stories- "The Simple Question", "Soaba", "The Curfew Man", "The Last Song" and "The Letter" highlight idyll hills of the Northeast India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide the framework for the stories. Further the stories depict the survival techniques and bewildered experiences of the characters amidst a spiral of violence. These stories trajectory multifarious issues, but the core emphasis is on identity crises.

The issue of identity gets more subtle with the mingling of personal and political conflicts as can be seen in her story "The Simple Question" that projects the hardship of Naga villagers for their livelihoods. They worked very hard on their fields and hardly got enough crops to survive, and the meager earned harvest had to meet the demand of the belligerent 'collectors' of the underground. The story is about a goanburahs who were appointed by the government from the major clans as their agent to help and maintain order in the village. They wore red and black jackets and red blankets as symbol of their status. The system continued even after India gained independence. But these innocent goanburahs were victims of hostilities of Nagas and the Indian government. If any young men from villages were reported to have joined the rebel forces, government was taking action; whereas the underground forces ordering them to join their army, if not they threatened to burn down the village granaries. The villagers were helpless to do anything.

Imdongla played a vital role in this story and rescued her husband who worked for government as goanburahs, and herself from the atrocities and torture of underground rebels. Ao highlights, "The demand for 'taxes', as they were termed by the underground, started innocuously enough. The very first time Re 1 collected from every household to

pay for the travel expenses of the rebel leader going to foreign lands to plead for Naga independence from India".

It was very difficult for Imdongla to part with her hard earned money; but there was no choice for her. The villagers protested to fulfill the demand of rebel leaders; the consequence was that not only the goanburahs but also the elders of the villagers were severely beaten. Imdongla with her razor sharp wit saved Tebaka several time from cruelties and beating of rebels.

The terror and brutalities of the underground forces as well as the government soldiers were at their heights. The army established camps in strategic village with regular patrols for the safety of soldiers. On the other hand the underground punished the villagers with double tax because they allowed the setting up of army camp. Tebaka and Imdongla were always oscillating between rebel and the government and life was a posing question of their identity.

Assertion of identity is handled with more care in "Soaba". The opening line itself picturizes the vociferous cry of a boy named Imtimoa for the assertion of identity: "No one really knew who his parents were or which village he came from. He grew up as the town orphan living on people's charity, often doing odd jobs like fetching water and splitting wood in various households. (Ao 9) Soaba was very slow in the head and rarely spoke fluently. He was very basic in conversation.

Tamsula Ao offers searing portraits of individuals in flesh and blood to depict the identity crisis in Nagaland. The preface of short stories speaks voluminous problems of Naga people, she says, "On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in Human terms."

Though rough passages were in the Nagaland, Soba was unaware of any reality except food, clothes and shelter. He was surging ahead in the whirlwind. Soaba along with the other Naga people cannot come to terms with the logic of the state-sponsored violence, and this aspect points to the significant constituent factors of the state. In the western political thought, Aristotle categorizes human existence into bare life (simple act of living) and good life (politically qualified life). The 'good life' is essentially the product of the state power i.e. the legitimization and regimentation of simple act of living. So in the state, individual's identity is constructed through the mediation of law. , by 'grouping' the Naga people as insurgents the state prepares the ground for legitimizing the Naga identity through paradigms of power-relations. The term 'insurgency' is 'bare' in Naga life which has to be legitimized and regimented. At the same time Ao contextualizes her story in such a time when the Naga people considered Indian forces as 'foreigners' and the Naga extremists as 'patriots': 'Young people spoke of the exploits of their peer in encounters with government forces and eager to join the new band of patriotic warriors to liberate their homeland from foreign rule" (Ao 3)

On the other hand, the story "Soaba" substantiates mute fervent appeal for identity of a boss's wife, called Imtila: "A simple woman who would have loved to continue being a normal housewife, looking after her husband and children. But her husband's changed fortunes compelled her to set aside hitherto sedate and domesticated lifestyle

and adopt one more in keeping with her husband's new status." The conditioned and meditated identity led her to an imprisoned and suffocated life because of her husband, who lured by easy money and booze, had joined the new outfit. Soaba without getting any remarkable identity met with tragic death. Ao explored the ordinary man's tragic end, "Thus ended the tragic tale of Soaba, who, like bewildered animal, had strayed out his natural habitat into a maze that simply swallowed him up" (Ao 21).

The personal need of a getting a job gets blended in political issues in the story "The Curfew Man" which exhibits variegated kaleidoscopic of snaps of hostility between two warring armies, the one over ground labeling the other as rebels fighting against the state and the other, operating from their underground hide out and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga territories. The story is about newly emerging spy called Satemba who had involved himself as a spy because of dire need of employment: "In order to detect and arrest the relatives of 'rebels' and their sympathizers, the government began to enlist recruits from the ranks of the bad elements in the towns and villages by paying them handsomely and sometimes even by threatening to reopen old criminal cases if they did not co-operates with them. These were the people who operated in the grey area between the government forces and the so-called 'freedom fighters', some by choice and others by compulsion". (Ao 35).

Though he was engaged as spy, he cannot betray the Naga struggle for freedom; this is the crisis of Naga identity. Ao knew ordinary men's pulses and throbs for Naga identity, she observes, "The real trouble was in his heart. For the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and so-called job." (A o 41).

The Indian army provided them employment. The Naga people joined army for survival question, but they were not able to sustain the job for longer because their inner conscience was not obeying their materialistic demands of mind. Hence, Statemba, representative of Naga people's inner turmoil, cannot sustain his job because of the sense of betrayal to his ethnic community, but the writer broods, "A new curfew man would be in place by evening and the man(Satemba) with the two smirked knee caps had already become history" (Ao 43).

A heart rendering sufferings of a girl Apenyo and her mother Lebeni can be witnessed in "The Last Song". The general tenor of the story is marked by a subtle sense of a shattering, devastating, and desperate attempt of daughter and mother to survive in the struggle of underground goanburahs and army soldiers, further it probes deeper into in-betweenness of ordinary people. As the story suggests, "Describing how ordinary people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force, how they seek and find safe spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror, the author details a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war. No one – the young, the old, and the militant with his gun, the ordinary house wife, the willing partner, and the young women who sing even as she was being raped – is left untouched by violence."

When Apenyo was a child she used to sing in congregations which was an embarrassing moment to her mother because she starts her own version consisting of loud shrieks and screams that irritated her mother Lebeni, so she stopped going to

church. The story portrays the hardship and struggle of people to survive as Libeni's husband Zhamben passed away when Apenyo was young child, who was school teacher and gifted singer both of traditional songs as well as Christian hymns at church, which was inherited to his daughter Apenyo. It was lonely struggle to cultivate a field and bring up a small child as herself. In spite of continuous insistence to Libeni by her relatives to get married to protect both of them, she rejected the proposal. Apenyo was the only one ray of hope for her, who was the star pupil in the school; moreover she was very good at weaving, which she inherited from her mother and exquisite in singing voice with matchless beauty. Due to her melodious voice, even commonest song sounded heavenly, by which she was named as "Singing Beauty".

Those days were troubled times for the Nagas. Independence movement was gaining momentum because of which all the villages were getting involved into it and paid taxes to underground government, through these rough passages, the villagers got an especially expectant mood because they were going to celebrate the dedication of the new church building in the month of December, "The whole village was being spruced up for the occasion as some eminent pastors from neighboring villages were being invited for the dedication service. The villagers began the preparations with great enthusiasm, often joking among themselves that this year they would have double Christmas!" (Ao 25). But that particular year was not smooth because government forces determined to 'teach' all those villagers the consequences of 'supporting' the rebel cause by paying the taxes. They were very indifferent to government activities and engrossed in celebration of 'dedication service'. The congregation was started and the lead singer was Apenyo who was standing in the middle of front row. As she started her song, there was the sound of gun fire in the distance that means the army would certainly disturb the festivities. The pastor was much worried and wanted to know what was happening. Dobashi, the villager, in frightened voice intimated the people to stay where they were and not to run away.

Meantime the soldiers surrounded the people, Apenyo burst into her solo song no one could judge whether she was brave or foolish? Even the entire choir burst into song that as an open defiance. The soldiers pushed and shoved the pastor and gaonburas towards the jeep, some of them made vain attempts of rescue by arguing or running away. But Apenyo continued her song as if an unseen presence was guiding. Apenyo was singing as if her heart was out to wring the God's heart and asking for helping hand. Libeni tried a lot to stop the song, but Apenyo was indifferent to her call. Meantime the leader of the army grabbed Apenyo by her hair towards the old church building; Yet Apenyo was singing the chorus on the song over and over again.

Libeni was searching her daughter and calling her name at almost benumbed and witnessed the act of atrocities at its height "When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach: the young captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. The mother crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward with an animal-like growl as if to haul the man off her daughter's body but a soldiers grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground." (Ao 28).

When Libeni protested and spat on the face of the soldiers she also met the same consequence. The words are inadequate to express the anguish of a mother. The song

toll lives of both in the abode of God. The villagers tried to carry the dead bodies, and then the captain ordered open fire and later wanted to wipe out evidence of the crime, so he set the church on fire. The story is representing the most traumatic and suffocating lives of Naga people.

A macrocosmic perception representing through microcosmic Naga village is depicted in "The Letter". The underground extortionists were exploiting the villagers' livelihood by snatching their hard earned money, who were not in condition to fulfill their basic needs. The border roads organization was constructing the road on villagers' land which is the only hope for their lives. In spite of losing their land, they were still happy because of getting chance to explore their lives through their labour which they can use to put tin roofs on their houses, buy two pairs of bulls to plough their fields and pay debt of their credit. They were not aware that it was like building castles in the air which may get shattered any moment by the extortionists. They entered in the village and called out the names of the villagers, who were involved in the construction and found that one man was missing from the group who assisted to bring timber for the construction.

At their astonishment, the extortionists were collecting detailed information of villagers work and payment received from BRO. they started to call out the villagers name, how much each man had to pay them as tax. The villagers were helpless and they were not capable for open defiance, "with hatred in their hearts and murders in their eyes," they paid their taxes but one man was counting his money several times because he wanted to clear his credit which was being borrowed from timber trader. If he fails to pay timber trader then he couldn't send money to his son for his final examinations. He fervently appealed and assured extortionists that he will pay the tax very soon. Even this man worked for fewer days because of his wife's illness and got less payment. He continued his pleading for their consideration before he was completing his request, one of the extortionists shot out from the stool with butt of his rifle, "What examination, what fees? Don't you know what sacrifices we have made in our fight against government? And how we are suffering in the forest? Are you saying that we should not collect taxes so that your sons can give examinations and become big "babus" in Indian government to rule over us?" (Ao 56).

Ramification of this hit was swelling mouth, bleeding mouth and nose but due to the god's grace saved from murder, through these villagers lives Tamsula Ao wants to capture variegated kaleidoscopic view of Naga people's quest for identity and helplessness. The headman of village empathized the pathetic plight of the unfortunate man and extended his helping hand by lending him some money by which he was able to pay his son's examination fees.

The villagers were meek and docile, always wanted to be safer side, so they stayed away from the all conflicts with both the underground and over ground governments. It was high time for them, atrocities were beyond their estimation. They started to share their grievances at homes, in fields and in forests. They were fed up with injustice inflicted on them by politics and Naga society moving towards anarchy. The consequence of the discussion led them to assemble at the headman's house, the elder were not ready to take any action against forces, whereas the youngsters favors the

action. The village council concluded that to stop paying taxes, refuse to do free labor for government, and refuse to sell any product to the army. After this assembly the life of the villagers was smooth for few days and they expected that the same would resume but they got unexpected blow. An armed man, presented himself as the member of underground, asked the direction to the headman's house to an old woman, who was witnessed insurgency movement and survived beatings at the hands of the army, and lived through the trauma of her husband's abduction and murder by the underground on charge of being informer of the Indian army.

The timbered woman misguided the armed man instead of directing to headman's house directed to the younger groups' house because she thought the man was one among the abductors.

The youngsters attacked the armed man, and there was conflict and chaos among them, lastly he met with death. Later the young group wanted to know the man's identity, they checked his pockets and found some papers and ID, but they were unreadable, only one letter, with address of nearby town postbox, was readable, which was from the dead man's son, begging the father to send his examination fees. Thus Tamsula Ao penetrates deeper into lives of Naga people. The people wanted to lead an ordinary life as a human being, but inhuman activities made them inhuman and lead to such horrible consequence.

The short stories of Tamsula Ao capture the voices of common Naga people, who are trapped in the struggle between the state and the Naga ethnic insurgency groups. It brings alive the poignant and bewildering experiences of people amidst violence. It is compelling saga of trauma, self-identity and strategies of survival. The paper (entitled *Identity and the Strategies of Bio-politics: A Reading of Tamsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is a result of the research work of K S Ahmed) concludes by Tamsula Ao's remark, "What the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life- their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scared both in mind and soil." Thus the stories are not about 'historical facts', but representing the real lives of Naga people because Tamsula Ao is one among them and she knew very well pulses of common people, her approach is not elites approach to literature but down to earth full of blood and flesh.

Work Cited

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